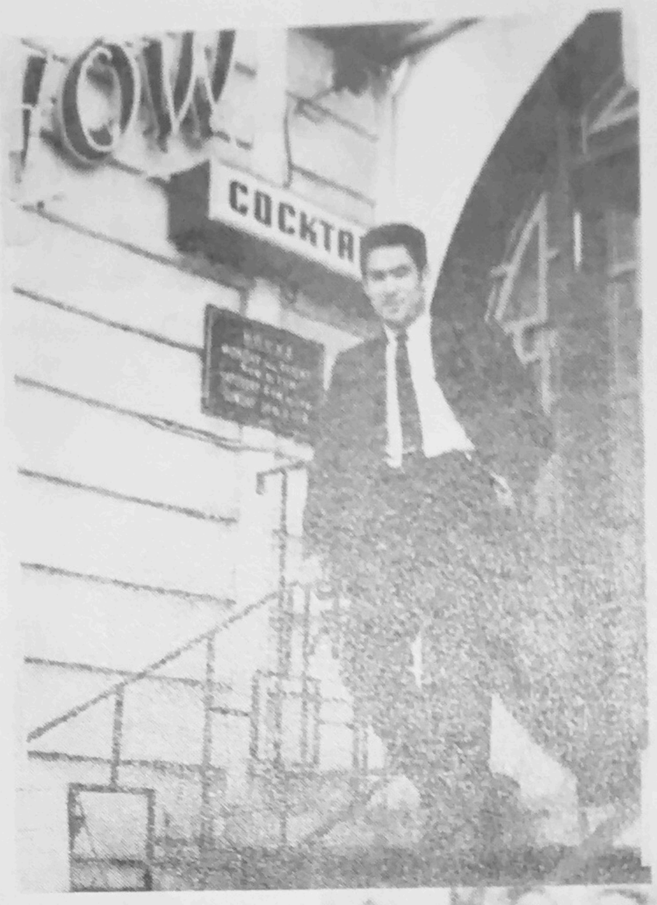
Bruce Lee's Secret of Superhuman SPEED

BY PAUL BAX & PAT STRONG



Inside Karate: How were you first introduced to Bruce Lee?

Pat Strong: I first learned about Bruce Lee from Doug Palmer who was one of Bruce's students. Sometime later, Jon Craig and I went to observe a gung fu workout and what we saw so impressed us that we immediately joined up. At that time Bruce was teaching a group of about a dozen students at an outdoor parking area beneath the Blue Cross Insurance building. Right across the street was Ruby Chow's Chinese Restaurant where Bruce had a small room for living quarters and worked as a waiter. The year was either late 1960 or early 1961.

IK: What was your previous martial arts experience before Bruce, if any, and if so what art?

PS: Both Jon Craig and I had been training in boxing gyms before starting gung fu. Neither of us had any Asian martial arts experience.

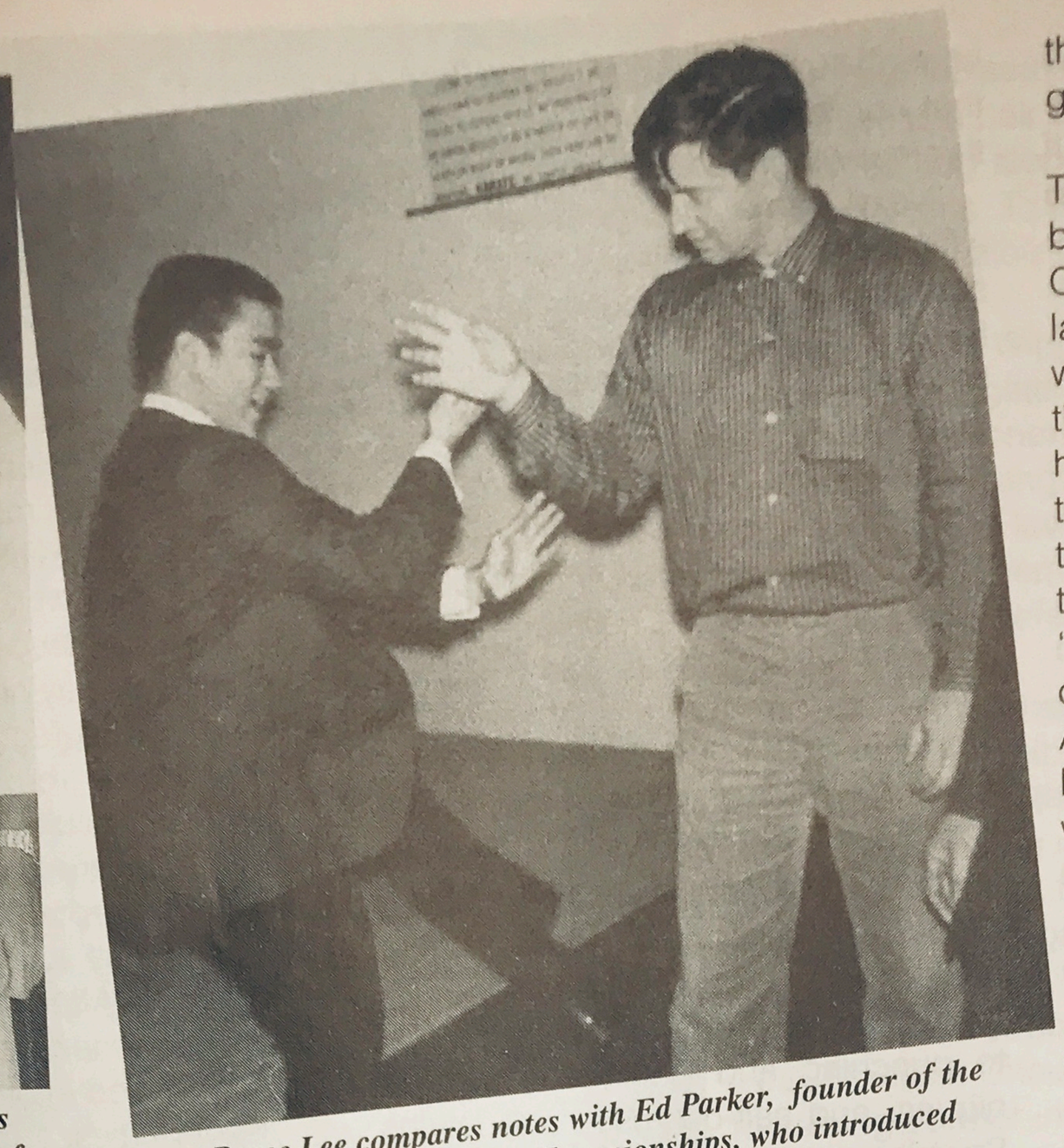
IK: What was your first impression of Bruce Lee regarding his confidence?

PS: I thought Bruce was extremely confident, even cocky. He was a natural showman who loved to dazzle audiences with his gung fu and feats of strength. He had a special quality about him that made him stand out from others and he loved to be at the center of things. As I think about it, I am reminded of something that Joe Hyams told me.

Joe and Writer/Producer Sterling

Patrick Strong, an original Bruce Lee student of the Seattle era, reveals the hidden, underlying principles that made Bruce Lee, literally, as fast as lightning.

Sterling Siliphant was responsible for many of Bruce Lee's early acting parts including a role in "Longstreet."



Bruce Lee compares notes with Ed Parker, founder of the International Karate Championships, who introduced Bruce to the world.

Siliphant had shared lessons with Bruce's at Joe's home in Beverly Hills, California. When in 1973 Bruce went to Hong Kong to make "Enter the Dragon", I took over teaching Joe who would later author a book titled, "Zen and The Martial Arts".

Joe had been an important newspaper columnist and author who knew and wrote about the biggest names of Hollywood's big star era. His chic exposure to the stars taught him that they all shared something in common. Joe called it "the star quality", an almost magical presence that came across both in life and on the big screen. From the first day that they met, Joe had detected that same star quality in Bruce. Joe likened Bruce's to James Dean, a man who resonated with youthful magnetism, and Humphrey Bogart, a man who stood out in any crowd.

IK: How about his ability?

PS: My first impression of Bruce was that he had hands as quick as thought, itself. In Hong Kong, Bruce had studied Wing Chun Gung Fu, a fighting system known for its effectiveness in the streets. It was a system based on the firm principles of simplicity, economy, sensitivity and practicality, all of which made Bruce's method uniquely direct and fast beyond comprehension. Wing Chun's Chi Sao (sticking hands) training had developed in Bruce a particular kind of contact sensitivity that enabled him to move like water through an opponent's defense. With his unique foundation based on scientific structure and powerful tools he was able to demonstrate incredible feats of strength over much larger and stronger opponents. To put it mildly, I thought Bruce was just plain amazing!

In 1964, Ed Parker hosted his International Karate Championship in Long Beach, California. Among the throngs of people that day stood Tsutumaka, Oshima, the first man ever to teach karate in the U.S. and one of the last men to have trained with the great Master, Funakoshi.

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Accompanying Oshima, Sensei was Taylor Atkins, one of Oshima's top black belts. According to Atkins, he and Oshima were standing together in a large room set aside for black belts that were preparing to give demonstrations that night. Neither Oshima nor Atkins had ever heard of Bruce Lee nor, for that matter, had hardly anyone else at that time. But as Bruce walked past them Oshima's gaze followed him. "That one," said Oshima, "he is the only one here who can do anything." As Atkins said to me, "Oshima had judged Bruce's level by the way he moved when he walked."

IK: His philosophy?

PS: Having been a young Chinese man raised and educated in Hong Kong, Bruce was influenced in all aspects of Chinese thought. In particular, his study of martial art had taught him powerful principles, strategies, and philosophy. I was struck at the way he was able to interpret the physical realities of his gung fu into illustrations of universal principles. It seemed to me that his gung fu and philosophy were interrelated and inseparable. Not only was he a talented martial artist, but he was also an astute philosopher.

For instance, take the way Bruce taught the Immovable Elbow Principle of Wing Chun. In the technical sense, he showed how the elbow position of certain tools should remain firm and not be permitted to give beyond one fist length from the body, or else a fighter's structure could easily be destroyed. From the philosophical point of view Bruce likened the steadfastness of the Wing Chun elbow to the resolve of honor. "if your honor does not hold firm," said Bruce, "then your character can be destroyed." Strategically, this same powerful principle applied to many things in every day life such as business, a relationship, or even a fight that is about to happen. In the latter case, Bruce used this analogy:

Bruce said, "A man looking for a fight calls me a nasty name and advances a step toward me. Not wanting to fight, I retreat a step and try to reason with him. This time he calls my mother a name and advances another step. I know that name-calling will do no harm to my mother and I fall back a second time. Now he senses that I must be afraid and he grows even more confident. A third time he advances, but

instead of retreating my move is both decisive and sudden! My attack catches him in mid-step and unprepared. If you ask me why did I wait so long to fight, my answer is because it was the third time that he approached me. You see three is the point I will not retreat beyond."

In a scene from "Enter the Dragon", Han (Shih Kien) has just given Roper (John Saxon) the grand tour of his drugs and prostitution operation. When Han suggests that Roper should join him, Roper refuses. Han replies, "So there is a point that you will not go beyond!"

Ummmm. . . sounds like a line Bruce might have written.

IK: Were you aware of Lee's grand scheme of opening martial arts schools nationwide and if so do you feel Lee could have pulled off such a feat?

PS: I was not aware of such a plan, however I believe that Bruce was capable of achieving anything that he set his mind to.

IK: Some martial arts students find a time where they might question their instructor's prowess. Did these feelings ever surface when you trained with Bruce?

PS: I was too much in awe of Bruce's skills to ever have doubted his capabilities.

IK: Describe a typical training session with Bruce Lee?

PS: The Seattle school was probably unique from the others in that none of the Seattle students had had previous martial arts experience, other than a few people who either played judo or boxed. Therefore, Bruce had to teach the entire Seattle group from scratch.

Bruce was an inspiring teacher, who demanded tough workouts and got them because no one wanted to be seen performing with less than their best effort. Each class began and ended with a gung-fu salutation followed by a period of meditation, which was an important aspect of our training. Next came grueling calisthenics and body toughening. Areas ot the bodv that required toughening were mostly the forearms and shins.

Bruce was adamant about developing strong tools. For instance, he explained that a tan sao (a palm up hand with the arm extended and slightly bent at the elbow) was not unlike a car jack that was specifically designed to fulfill its mechanical purpose. "A lightweight jack," Bruce said, "may lift a Volkswagen but it may not be strong enough to lift a Cadillac." He insisted that our tools be strong enough to do the really big jobs.

Next, came the forms an area in which Bruce personally excelled. It is said that Bruce discounted the importance of forms with his later students, however what is overlooked is the fact that forms played an important role in Bruce's own development of proper structural alignment and mechanics.

In addition to the three forms of Wing Chun (Sil Lum Tao, Chum Kil, and only a part of Bil Gee), there was a Southern style long form which may have been from Hung Gar. There was also a Tai Chi form (Bruce had learned Tai Chi from his father), and a short northern style kicking form that included front kicks, side kicks, back kicks and double kicks.

A great deal of time was dedicated to punching and kicking drills, techniques, and self-defense applications. Sparring matches were one-on-one, two-on-one and, occasionally, three-on-one. There was always a strong emphasis on speed and, most important, how to initiate a move "without intention," a principle that held the secret to Bruce's amazing speed.

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Following class, the group would often meet for dinner at one of the local Chinese restaurants. It was during this time that Bruce was more apt to share his experiences and ideas. I learned early on that athis was also the time to pay very close attention, because this is where the real gems of information were to be found.

IK: Describe Bruce Lee's inner game?

PS: Many books have been written about Bruce's Jun Fan and Jeet Kune Do. Although the descriptions of technique and strategy are accurate, none of the books that I have seen shed much light on Bruce's highly evolved and unique inner game. In other words, the very secrets of his structure, neuromuscular efficiencies and functional mechanics that made him different than other martial artists.

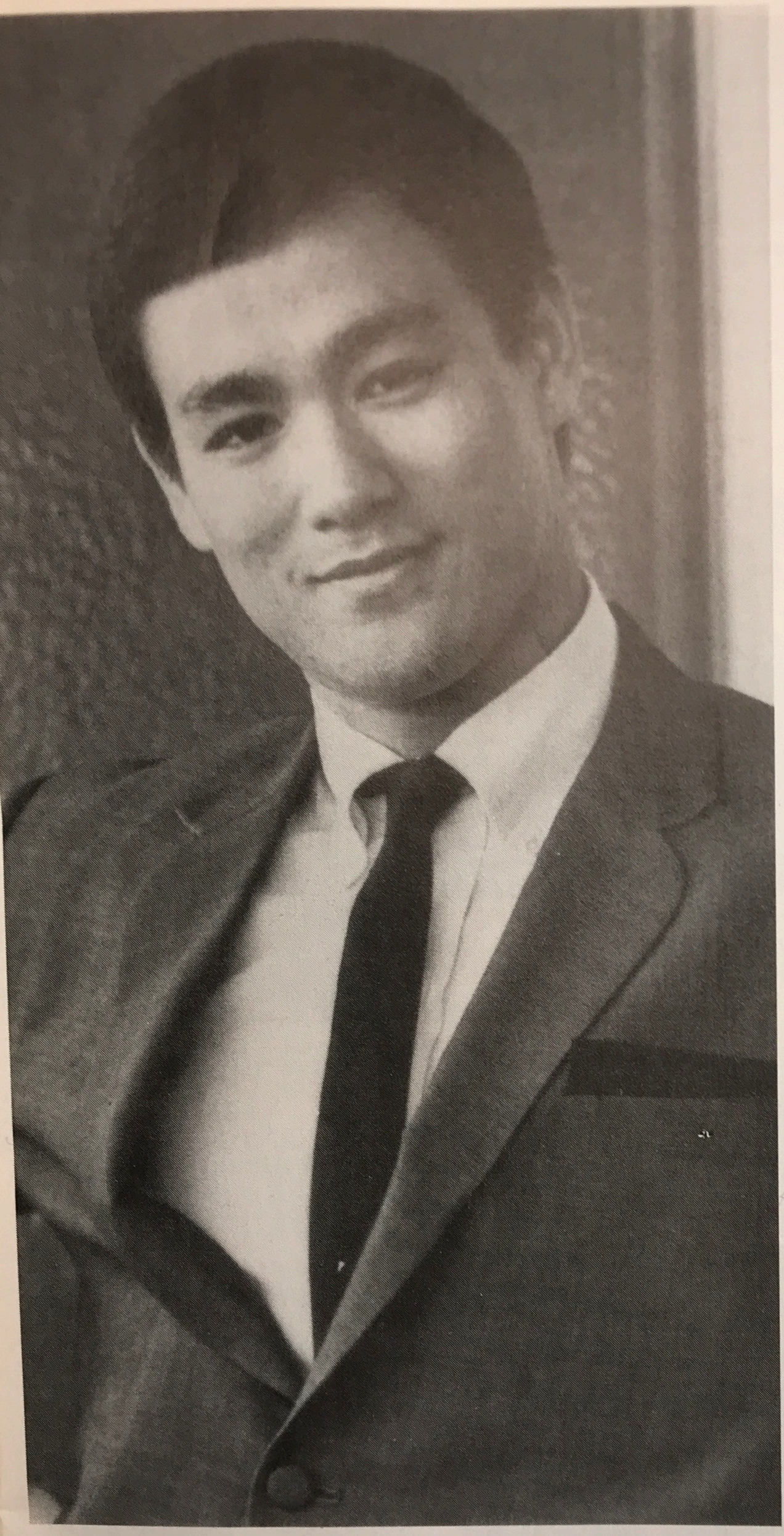
For those who follow the concepts approach to Bruce's method, this inner information may not be such a big deal in light of the fact that their own inner games come from training in other systems. As a result, concepts people may be more interested in the rudimentary skills, concepts and guidelines that they can use to better free their own expression. After all, this is exactly what Bruce intended for students already accomplished in other arts.

Nevertheless, the serious student who wishes to come as close as he can at acquiring Bruce's personal skills must first have a clear understanding of his body of laws and proper principles. The student will need to train the same kind of structure and drills as did Bruce in order to pattern correct neuro-pathways. Only in this way will he truly develop Bruce's inner game.

To make myself clear on this point, let us take Bruce's Principle of Non-intention, a word curiously absent from Bruce Lee literature. Yet, this single principle reaches beyond the concept of mere non-telegraph. To lean non-telegraph without non-intention is to learn only a part of what was a major factor responsible for Bruce's amazing speed.

While non-telegraph means to move without sending a telegram to your opponent, non-intention means to strike without intending to strike. Or, to put it another way, to eliminate the time it takes for the brain to send its message to the muscles to contract in order to strike. Bruce said it this way, "Be like a set of keys lying on the edge of a table. When the table moves, the keys fall. They do not prepare to fall, or think to fall. They just fall. Without intention."

Another principle worth mentioning that has to do with Bruce's inner game involves "The Rebound Effect". Newton's Law states that for every action there is a reaction. In order to maximize power and penetration, Bruce had to defy Newton's law by knowing how to deliver the action into the target without becoming the recipi-



ent for the reaction. Rebound was one of the major reasons that inhibited timing, caused muscle lock up, and extinguished fluidity.

Bruce's highest ideal as a fighter was the attainment of absolute innocence through self-expression. Perhaps it is this one concept that is most misunderstood and most difficult to accomplish. The weight of this concept hinged directly on a person's ability to become one with his opponent, a single interacting duality. To be able in an instant to not only counter an attack, but recounter, recounter again, and again, and again, like water filling holes. Bruce's major criticism of classical form was not only that much of the movement was unessential, but that he felt that it actually programmed the student to the worse possible condition in a fight, that of getting stuck. It was Bruce's goal to teach his students how not to get stuck so that they could remain dynamic and instantly dangerous at any given opportunity.

Bruce held the same view of tournament fighters and compared them to a pair of cocks fighting. First, one cock pecks a few times and stops, then the other cock pecks once or twice and s tops. To Bruce, this kind of sparring was more a form of constipation than becoming the complement of the opponent.

The practice of Wing Chun's Chi Sao had taught Bruce the meaning of not getting stuck in movement. In Hong Kong, low level practitioners could rarely go beyond one counter move before having to back out of engagement. On the other hand a high level practitioner was expected to be able to hold the engagement and either clear out or cut through the opponent's defense no matter how many recounters were required.

It is no wonder that Bruce was so enthralled with boxing where fighters exhibited a more dynamic and free form of combat. To Bruce, this was quite different than the start and stop methods of so many Asian martial arts. These are just a few examples of the kind of principles that were at the core Bruce's inner game.

IK: What are your thoughts on Bruce Lee's departure on the Wing Chun structure?

PS: Hawkins Cheung was Bruce's close friend and gung fu training partner in Hong Kong. As Hawkins tells it, a few months before Bruce left for the U.S. they went to train with a gung fu master who was proficient in a number of systems. Bruce told Hawkins that he planned to teach gung fu in the west and that he wanted to be able to demonstrate flashier looking techniques than those that are found in Wing Chun. And so, when Bruce came to the United States he did exactly what he told Hawkins he would do. Instead of teaching traditional Wing Chun, he offered a diluted form of gung fu having strong Wing Chun undercurrents. Originally, Bruce call his method gung fu. He later changed the name to Jun Fan Gung Fu which he expanded and renamed Jeet Kune Do.

It is a fact that all martial arts share common characteristics, but there are also marked differences between them. Many beginning students tend to see the similarities, but are unfamiliar with the differences. What is important to keep in mind is that Bruce's home system was Wing Chun Gung Fu. This means that his core development, not to mention the very principles that guided his future outgrowth were all based on the platform and science of Wing Chun.

Imagine for a moment that Bruce's original training had been Kenpo, Shotokan or, for that matter, any system other than Wing Chun Gung Fu. If such were the case, Bruce's entire methodology would have been woven from a different fabric. His movement would have been based on different principles and mechanics. It would not have been as economical, direct, fluid, or as fast. Surely, he would not have developed contact sensitivity, an equivalent base of examination, or even the same values from which to build upon. In fact, every thing would have been different and, in many ways, diametrically opposed to Wing Chun principles. In truth, while it may appear outwardly that Bruce departed from Wing Chun, his inside Wing Chun game was still very much intact.

IK: Haven't you gone back and traced what important elements Bruce chose to leave out of Wing Chun to his students? If so, what did Bruce leave out?

PS: Throughout my research, I have come to realize that Bruce left out many things, particularly having to do with the

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inner structure and mechanics of Wing Chun. As to why, the answer may always remain an enigma. From my point of view, several reasons come to mind:

1. Bruce was only eighteen years old when he left Hong Kong. Certainly, while he was a very talented individual he had not yet attained instructor level or status. Conceivably, he may have felt that it was not appropriate to teach the pure or higher level Wing Chun secrets.

2. Since Bruce was not at the instructor's level in wing chun and, even though his mechanics and muscle memory were developed, he did not yet know how to teach higher level concepts.

3. Bruce was born under the sign of the Dragon. The character of the Dragon is secrecy. While the Dragon may show his top cards, he always keeps a few to himself so that their secrets can never be used against him. Although I am not one to believe in such things, there are many Chinese people who take them quite seriously.

4. Bruce was selective of what and whom he taught. Keep in mind that he once told Danny Inosanto not to teach certain techniques as they were to be kept top secret. Those same techniques mentioned by Inosanto were nothing more than intermediate techniques back in Seattle, yet Bruce decided that they should be veiled.

5. Bruce had neither the time nor patience to teach all the minute details. Perhaps he was more intensely involved in his own development. As Jessie Glover, Bruce's first student has said, "We were all dummies for Bruce to train on."

6. Overall, many of Bruce's students had no previous martial art training, while others were already black belts. To this latter group, Bruce's objective was not to remold them to be like himself but, rather, to show them how to free themselves from their own limitations. Naturally, he would hold back whatever information he felt was not needed.

Personally, I think it may have been a combination of all of the above reasons plus a few more that was the cause of Bruce holding back information.

IK: Most people believe Jesse Glover was the best student to ever emerge from his school, yet Jesse contends that his brother was the person who rivaled Lee in skill. Were you in class with Mike Lee and if so, what are your thoughts on his prowess?

PS: I remember Mike Lee first as a young boy being taught by Jessie at his school on Pine Street. Years later, Mike opened his own school. I visited him one night and watched while he taught a class in Modified Gung Fu. Indeed, Mike looked strong, impressive and very talented. In talking with Skip Elsworth, Bruce's 3rd original student, Skip affirms Michael's incredible strength and growth as a martial artist. Still, it would be unrealistic to predict which of Bruce's students was best. To do so you would require that you put everyone together and compare them. Keep in mind, many of Bruce's students have moved on past the days with Bruce and have progressed a great deal further in their own knowledge and development.

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IK: Bruce Lee coined the term JKD to label his fighting method in the late 60's. What are your thoughts on Lee's "evolution" to JKD?

PS: The evolution of Jun Fan/JKD was the result of a man with a creative spirit and a man who dared to be great. Hawkins Cheung read to me a letter from Bruce in which he stated that he found many karateka in California to be very big and very fast, and that he felt in order to be on top he would have to get even faster.

To get faster, Bruce researched and analyzed what he felt were the best and most applicable aspects from other martial arts systems, including fencing and boxing. He added to all of this a highly selective physical training program, one that would build his body into a specialized fighting instrument. He learned from others and learned from teaching others all the while evolving himself and his methodology. I can only wonder at Bruce's genius and how to what new heights he would have taken his JKD had he lived.

IK: Lee's art has taken two distinct directions in the last 24 years. One being that JKD encompasses all arts thus one should study every martial art possible. The other side remains tied to Lee's principles and theories of JKD before he died. They feel his art should be experienced the way he taught it before venturing out into "using their own way as way." Your thoughts.

PS: This is a question I find difficult to answer. I suppose the problem comes in trying to define exactly what is JKD. There are just too many levels and aspects to Bruce's teachings that range all the way from black to white and covering the gray between.

On one hand, I feel that if a student wants to learn Bruce Lee's method he should know the proper basics. On the other hand, it is perfectly correct for those people who are already trained in other arts to go ahead and explore Bruce's ideas and to make the most of them for their own benefit.

IK: The JKD Nucleus was formed to promote the teachings of Bruce Lee. Your thoughts on this newly formed organization.

PS: I attended the Second Annual Jun Fan/JKD Nucleus Conference where I was given the privilege to appear as one of the guest speakers. I was very much impressed with the turn out of over 450 people from all over the world who came to honor Bruce and Brandon, and to help in whatever way they could to perpetuate the future of Jun Fan/JKD. I believe that as a living repository of information the Nucleus will prove to be necessary if Bruce's teachings are to be preserved in any form of completeness or technical accuracy.

IK: In closing, how did Bruce Lee affect you as a human being and martial artist?

PS: Since having trained with Bruce, I have studied a variety of systems over the past 38 years to include Shorin Ryu Karate, Tae Kwon Do, Traditional Wing Chun, Modern Arnis, Balintiwak, Gracie Jiu Jitsu, Kick Boxing, Boxing, plus

smatterings of a few others. However it is still the core method that I learned from Bruce that remains at the heart of my personal martial arts character.

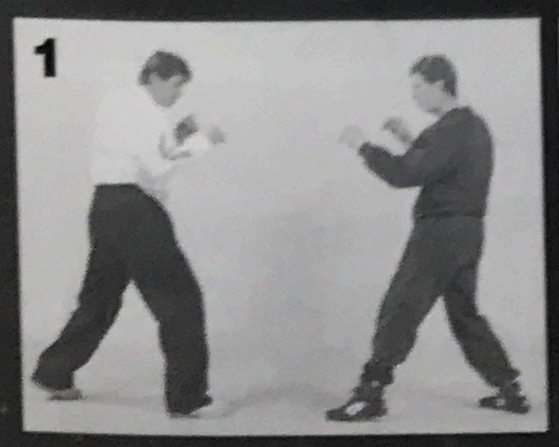
I should add that knowing Bruce has had a direct affect on my life. Had I not known him, I would not be the person that I am today. And, to me, that would be an unthinkable alternative.

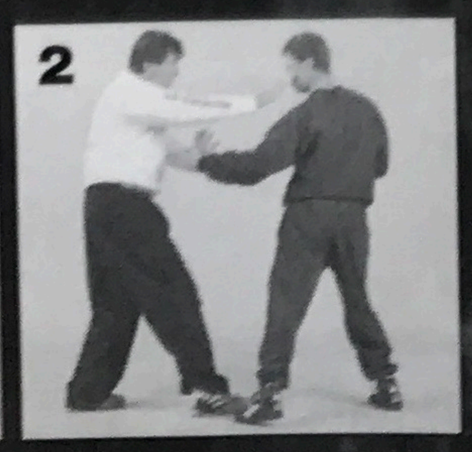
At the core of Bruce Lee's personal fighting skills were the powerful principles born of wing chun gung fu. In Bruce's personal development he applied these principles and, at the same time, recreated a few to tailor fit his own methodology. Here are a few of the more basic principles.

The powerful Economy of Movement principle had a special meaning to Bruce who was a strong advocate of simplicity over complexity. For instance, rather than counter an attack with the two separate movements by first blocking and then striking, Bruce combined defense and offense into a single movement. It did not matter from where the attack came whether it be left side, right side, outside, inside, or high or low, Bruce's answer was simple, fast and effective.

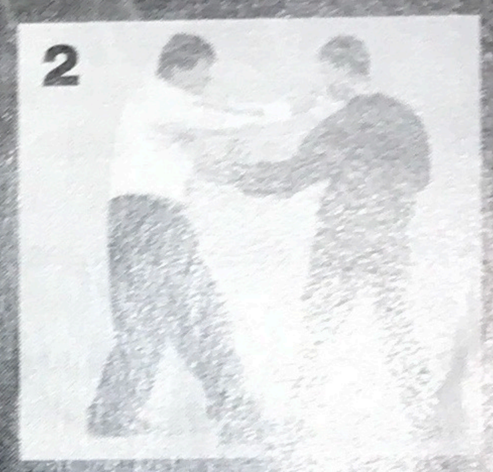
Using the Center Line and Reverse Cone Principles, Bruce's lead punch and defensive rear hand moved from his center to connect simultaneously with the incoming strike and target at the same time.

Against left jab

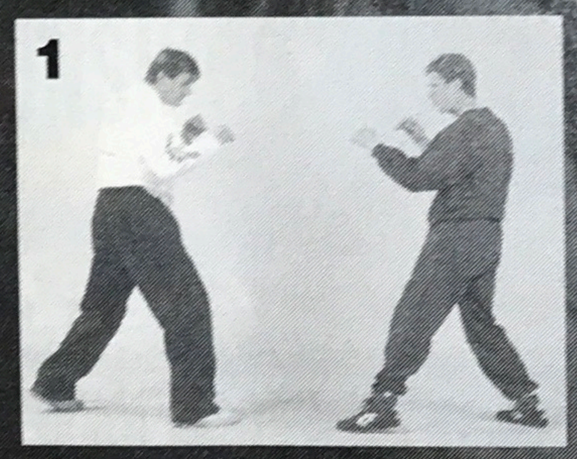


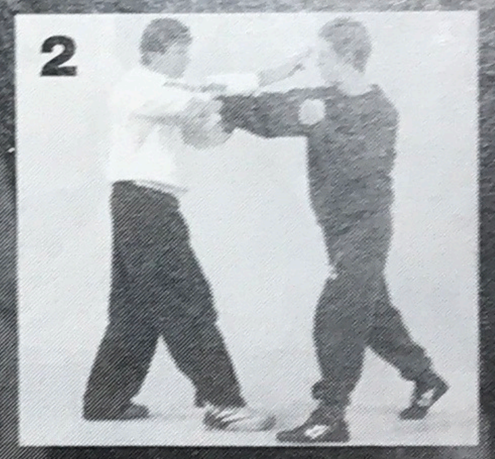


Against low left to body

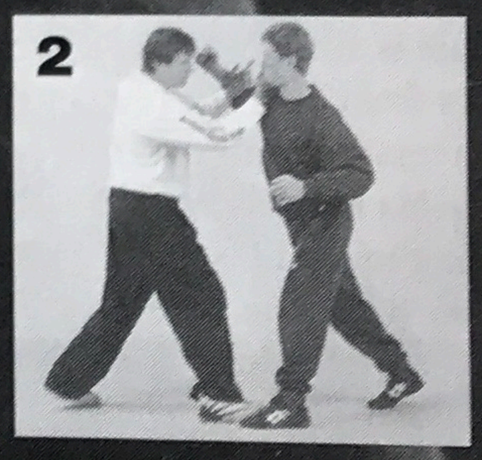


Against straight right

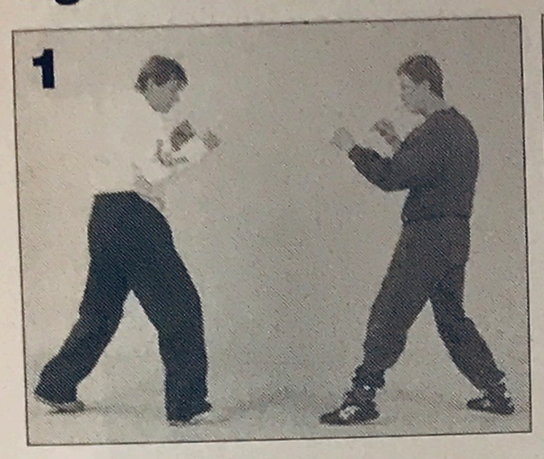


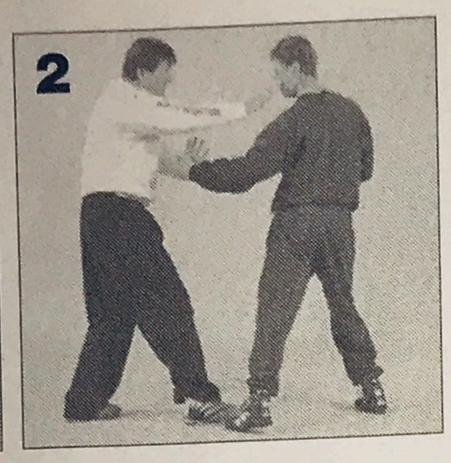


Against right hook



Against low right



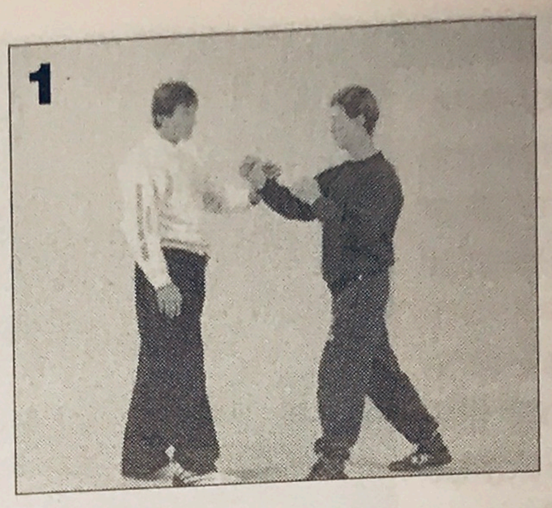


The Principle of Non-intention was re-created from concepts found in wing chun's chi sao (sticking hands). Unlike telegraphing where a fighter sends a signal to his opponent that he is about to strike, non-intention means to strike without intending to strike. To get a better understanding of this principle try the following exercise:

Your partner lightly touches the back of your lead hand. As he quickly draws his hand away, you react and punch with your lead hand to his chest. Try this several times and take careful notice of the approximate 2/10ths second delay (if you are very fast) that occurs between the time his hand moves and your strike.

The delay is the reaction time it takes for you to react and for your brain to send the signal to your muscles to contract and punch. By using Non-intention, Bruce was able to elimimate that 2/10th second, just enough time for him to strike three more times.

Let's try it again. This time apply a good amount of pressure against your partner's hand. It is important that the pressure is aimed directly toward the center of his body and comes from your hips rather than your arm. Your arm should be relaxed with the hand held open. As your partner moves his hand away, your own hand should involuntarily spring toward his chest without the instant of delay. There, you have just taken the first step toward understanding non-intention—to strike without intending to strike.



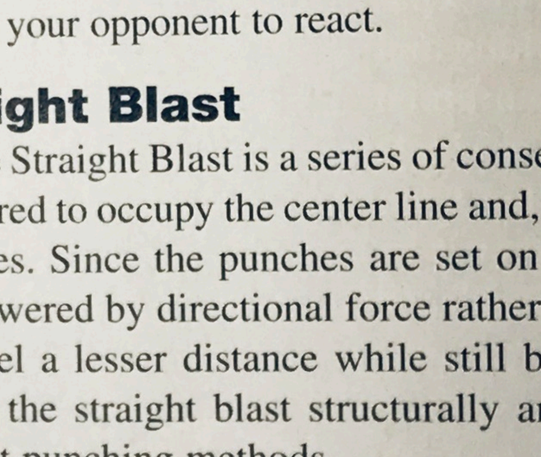
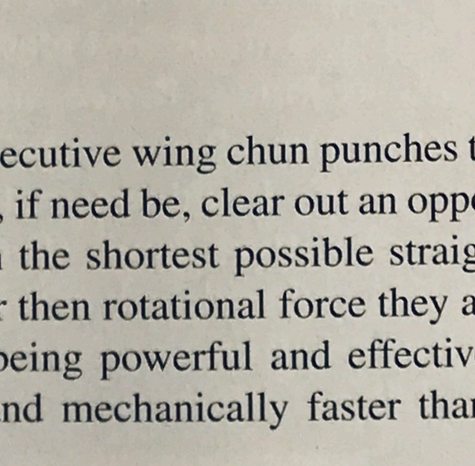
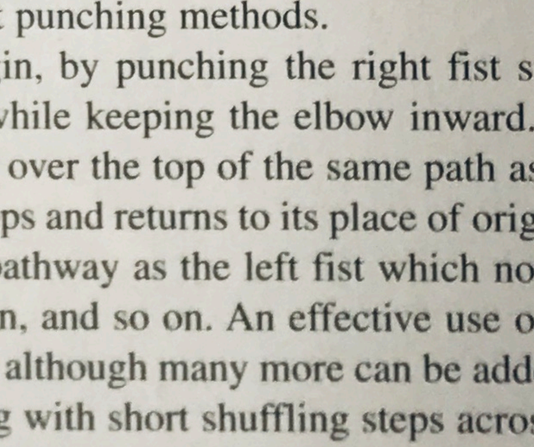
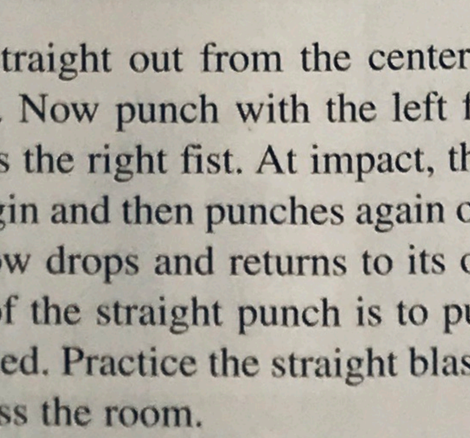
In the above example, the spring effect was used to initiate a strike without having to think about striking—non-intention. Bruce also used his principle of non-intention at the outside range before contact has been made. However, because the spring effect relies on the weakening or sudden loss of pressure, a new dynamic is used. It is called gravity.

Like the set of keys that lie on the table, they don't think about falling or how to fall. They just fall. The key word here is "fall". Falling is the result of eccentric muscle action (the stretch phase of muscle movement) versus concentric muscle action (the contraction phase of muscle movement).

The trick then is to initiate a movement by letting go and not by contracting the muscles.

Begin by allowing the lead hand to drop slowly toward your opponent. When the moment is right you will feel your hand strike. This is Bruce's secret of moving the hand before the body, which is just the opposite of the mechanics found in other martial arts. Add to this, that as your hand shoots forward your body will naturally follow aided by your footwork. With practice, you will find that your muscles will have contracted by the time you are already half way or better toward target impact, and that you have moved to fast for your opponent to react.

Straight Blast

The Straight Blast is a series of consecutive wing chun punches that are structured to occupy the center line and, if need be, clear out an opponent's defenses. Since the punches are set on the shortest possible straight line and powered by directional force rather then rotational force they are able to travel a lesser distance while still being powerful and effective. This makes the straight blast structurally and mechanically faster than other straight punching methods.

Begin, by punching the right fist straight out from the center of the chest while keeping the elbow inward. Now punch with the left fist following over the top of the same path as the right fist. At impact, the right fist drops and returns to its place of origin and then punches again over the same pathway as the left fist which now drops and returns to its original position, and so on. An effective use of the straight punch is to punch in threes, although many more can be added. Practice the straight blast while moving with short shuffling steps across the room.